

HOW MIGHT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS SEE INDICATORS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING THROUGH TRAVELING SALES CREWS?

Local government staff who manage any permitting or registration process for traveling sales crews, as well as any staff who might respond to nuisance calls or complaints about fraudulent or intimidating sales tactics, should be aware of the indicators of human trafficking through traveling sales crews.¹

The presence of one or more indicators does not prove that the situation involves trafficking but does warrant closer attention by local government authorities.

One such indicator is that a single person controls all of the identification papers of the crew. Another is that the crew members are not allowed phones or contact with family or friends outside the crew. The crews travel together, often in passenger vans, and do not stay in a community for long.

The magazine sellers might try to motivate buyers by telling them they may purchase a subscription and donate it to a charity in lieu of receiving it themselves, or that the solicitor works for a charitable organization. Similarly the sales agents might try to convince purchasers that the sales agents are local students, on a local sports team, etc., to make the sale.²

Some individual behavioral indicators of the sales crew include the following:

- Not carrying business identification cards or ID lanyards
- Soliciting door-to-door after dark
- Soliciting alone
- Appearing to be hungry, thirsty, or overtired
- Hurrying from one residence to the next
- Dressing inappropriately for the weather
- Employing hard sell or intimidating tactics
- Expressing fear or dismay if the sale is not completed (not just disappointment)
- Not knowing what town or state they are in.

The Polaris Project, which is affiliated with the National Human Trafficking Hotline, provides these additional indicators, which might be less immediately visible to local government staff but could be revealed by talking privately with individual crew members:

- Physical, sexual and/or verbal abuse
- Denial of wages
- False promises

¹ These indicators also apply to traveling crews that offer clean up and repair services. Areas that have been affected by natural disasters, in particular, can be targeted by those crews.

² The Oregon Department of Justice offers these tips about identifying fraudulent sales crews on their website at <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/police/article/150437> "Door to door magazine sales crews: Consumer tips on how to avoid becoming a victim."

- Psychological manipulation
- Threats of abandonment
- Isolation and/or removal from familiar surroundings
- Claims that crew members are indebted to the organization
- Denial of food and/or adequate sleeping conditions
- Misrepresentation of working conditions
- High sales quotas and punishment for failure to meet them

When talking directly and privately with the crew members, understand they likely will not identify themselves as victims of human trafficking. Initiate the conversation by asking indirect questions, such as how they got into the work, where they are from, whether the job and pay turned out to be what they expected, whether they have had anything to eat or drink today, whether they take breaks to rest or have a safe place to sleep. Be aware that traffickers can lure their victims by providing an important sense of belonging or opportunity, which the victims may be reluctant to betray. The traffickers also control the victims through both actual and perceived threats of violence, isolation, abandonment, debt bondage, or withholding of food or other resources.

How does human trafficking through traveling sales crews happen?

According to the Polaris Project, traveling sales crews move between cities and states and go door-to-door, often selling fraudulent products such as magazine subscriptions or products that customers may never receive. They target teens and young adults from marginalized and economically disadvantaged communities. The crew members are rarely fully compensated, sell all day, and are unable to leave due to fraud, manipulation, and coercion. As a result, managers of sales crews find this business model of labor trafficking financially rewarding and low-risk. The groups frequently change names and operating locations while keeping the same ownership, which can be difficult to trace. Victims in this category of trafficking are commonly U.S. citizens and frequently are homeless young men.

- Download the full report about sales crews from the Polaris Project here: <https://polarisproject.org/resources/knocking-your-door-labor-trafficking-sales-crews>
- Learn more about the twenty-five business models of human trafficking identified by the Polaris Project at <https://polarisproject.org/typology>

What do we do if we suspect trafficking?

The best time to figure out expectations for reporting is before the situation presents itself.

- If it appears that anyone is at immediate risk of physical threat or being taken away, call 911. Otherwise, call the non-emergency line of local law enforcement.
- If minors are involved, call Child Protective Services.
- If you are unsure and want to assess the situation, or if the crew has already left your community, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at (888) 373-7888.

For guidance on setting up departmental protocols about when and how to report suspected trafficking, see the related section in "[Exploring the Intersection between Local Governments and Human Trafficking: The Local Government Focus Group Project](#)," available online at www.sog.unc.edu